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Shanzhai Media Culture: Failed Intervention to the Disingenuous Neoliberal Logic of Chinese Media

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ABSTRACT

This article studies *shanzhai* media culture, a specific type of *shanzhai* culture that copycats the most-watched shows of China Central Television (CCTV) with a sense of satire and play. The article discusses why CCTV has become a popular target of *shanzhai*, how CCTV's brand shows are *shanzhai-ed* and what are the political implications of *shanzhaing* these established programs. By presenting Lao Meng's *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala as a case study, the author argues that *shanzhai* media culture is a creative, participatory and Internet-facilitated grassroots media production, which attempted to resist and intervene in the power–money hegemony of CCTV underpinned by the disingenuous neoliberal logic of Chinese media. However, this culture failed to do so and has been co-opted and reshaped by the powerful logic it attempted to challenge.

The Chinese term *shanzhai* (山寨) literally translates as 'mountain village' or 'mountain stronghold'. It originally referred to the mountain stockades of regional warlords or bandits who were rebelling against the authorities and acting outside official jurisdiction.¹ 'Liang Shan Bo', an independent and anti-government *shanzhai* fortress in the medieval folk novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (水浒传), which performed outlaw deeds in the name of the people outside the corrupt imperial governance of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), is the most familiar *shanzhai* image to Chinese people.

The modern adoption of the historical term *shanzhai* has prevailed since the early 2000s when it began to spread from Shenzhen—China's first special economic zone in Guangdong province—to most regions in the country. Retaining the spirit of 'nonconformity', 'heroism', 'self-preservation' and 'autonomy' of its original meaning,² the modern term *shanzhai* refers to 'a blurring of commodity and simulacra: cheap copycats, fakes, pirated goods, local versions of globally branded products, celebrity impersonators, as well as parodies of mainstream and official culture'.³ From iPhone to MacBook, from Coca-Cola to Michael Jackson, from the 'Bird's Nest' Olympic Stadium in Beijing to the New Year's gala, copycat or clone counterparts are widely consumed by Chinese people in everyday life, making *shanzhai*

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¹Xi Wen, 'The recurring *shanzhai*: a phenomenon', *China Today* 58(2), (2009), pp. 42–46.

²Josephine Ho, 'Shanzhai: economic/cultural production through the cracks of globalization', paper presented at the 8th Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference, Hong Kong, 2010, available at: <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw/members/Ho/20100617%20Crossroads%20Plenary%20Speech.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2012).

³Michael Keane and Elaine Jing Zhao, 'Renegades on the frontier of innovation: the *shanzhai* grassroots communities of Shenzhen in China's creative economy', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53(2), (2012), p. 217.

a national economic and cultural phenomenon. Yu Hua, an internationally renowned Chinese writer, in his *China in Ten Words*, selected 'shanzhai' as a keyword that characterizes Chinese society today.⁴

The *shanzhai* phenomenon has received attention from English-language scholarship in recent years. Michael Keane and Elaine Jing Zhao view *shanzhai* as an instance of China's 'emerging creative economy' and an opportunity to release 'the dormant creativity and anti-authoritarian spirit of the grassroots'. They argue that *shanzhai* has provided impetus to China's creative industry with 'a new prototype for an innovative nation'.⁵ Xi Cui used discourse analysis to examine the coverage of *shanzhai* cultural production in China's metropolitan and Party newspapers. He found that the commercial newspapers, which largely speak for the urban middle-class consumers, mostly used 'rival discourse', while the Party newspapers mostly used 'harmony discourse' to frame *shanzhai* culture. The competing discourses have demonstrated the contested legitimacy of *shanzhai* at the grassroots and official levels.⁶ Lin Zhang and Anthony Fung critically study the 'myth of *shanzhai*' in association with the rise of the Internet-enabled 'grassroots digital democracy'. By analyzing the Internet-based campaign for the *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala, one of the most subversive cases of *shanzhai*, which copycatted and challenged the monopoly of the annual Spring Festival Gala run by China Central Television (CCTV), they argue that the myth of *shanzhai* lies in its 'symbiotic relationship with power', which 'enables and confounds political resistance'. The *shanzhai* myth thus reflects digital democracy in China as 'contested', 'fluid' and paradoxical.⁷ Andrew Chubb goes beyond the previous ethnographic case studies on *shanzhai* and insightfully theorizes *shanzhai* culture as 'cultural hybridization' and a successor to 'Grabism' termed by China's literary giant Lu Xun. He argues that *shanzhai* reflects 'the active reappropriation of economic and cultural authority for diverse local purposes, which have themselves been shaped and redefined by those same authorities'.⁸

This article also studies *shanzhai* cultural phenomenon, but it focuses on one particular type of *shanzhai* culture, which the author calls 'shanzhai media culture'. This culture refers to a range of grassroots media productions that copycat the most-watched brand programs of CCTV, including its Spring Festival Gala (春节联欢晚会), *Network News* (新闻联播), *Lecture Room* (百家讲坛), *Focus Interview* (焦点访谈) and so on. The article asks why CCTV has become a popular target of *shanzhai*, how CCTV's brand shows are *shanzhai-ed* and what are the political implications of *shanzhaing* these established programs. It explores the formation, performance, evolution, promises and limitations of *shanzhai* media culture by presenting Lao Meng's *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala as a case study. This article argues that *shanzhai* media culture is a creative, participatory and Internet-facilitated grassroots media production, which attempted to resist and intervene in the power–money hegemony of CCTV underpinned by the disingenuous neoliberal logic of Chinese media. However, this culture failed to do so and has been co-opted and reshaped by the powerful logic it challenged.

Shanzhai Media Culture: When *shanzhai* Meets *e'gao*

Shanzhai media culture is a hybrid cultural practice, which has its origins in and absorbs the characteristics of the *shanzhai* culture and *e'gao* (恶搞) culture—a popular online spoofing culture that will be explained later. It can be seen as a 'hybrid work' thus exists betwixt and between two cultural traditions while providing a path that can be explored from both directions.⁹ This section examines how

⁴Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011).

⁵Keane and Zhao, 'Renegades on the frontier of innovation', pp. 216–230.

⁶Xi Cui, 'Discourse on Shanzhai cultural production in Chinese newspapers: authenticity and legitimacy', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5(4), (2012), pp. 399–416.

⁷Lin Zhang and Anthony Fung, 'The myth of "shanzhai" culture and the paradox of digital democracy in China', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14(3), (2013), pp. 401–416.

⁸Andrew Chubb, 'China's shanzhai culture: "Grabism" and the politics of hybridity', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(92), (2015), pp. 260–279.

⁹Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 113.

the *shanzhai* culture and *e'gao* culture develop, absorb and transform elements of each other to form hybrid *shanzhai* media culture.

China's *shanzhai* culture originated from the development of the handset industry in Shenzhen and other nearby cities in the Pearl River Delta region in the early 2000s. In 2005, Taiwan's cell phone chip solution company, MediaTek, launched a new chip solution, featuring 'all-in-one functionality', which combined the motherboard and software.¹⁰ The innovative integrated circuit (IC) design sharply reduced the time and cost of research and development in the traditional handset industry and transformed the traditional manufacturing process into 'manufacturing networks', in which each player in the mobile phone industry could specialize in a specific contribution, such as IC design, hand-model making or final assembly.¹¹ More importantly, the new manufacturing model transformed the entire supply chain of transnational handset companies, lowered the threshold for entry into the mobile telecommunications industry, and reduced costs and market prices. These, in turn gave rise to the birth of China's *shanzhai* mobile (山寨机) industry.

Most *shanzhai* mobile producers deliberately name their brands as 'Nokir', 'Samsing' and 'Sunny-Ericsson', similar to the global name brands in spelling, and copycat these companies' handsets in appearance and function. The strategy of imitation enables small manufacturers to accumulate capital and build their brands.¹² When their brands are widely recognized by consumers and the small firms have grown to a certain size, the manufacturers then try to get rid of their initial *shanzhai* color and enhance their innovative capabilities and competitiveness in the market.¹³ The rapid development of the *shanzhai* mobile industry significantly challenged the monopoly in the Chinese market of international cell phone companies from Europe, the United States and Japan.¹⁴

The success of the *shanzhai* mobile industry has created a replicable *shanzhai* model of production, which uses an 'imitation-plus-innovation' strategy,¹⁵ and emphasizes entrepreneurship and opportunism. The model is now widely applied in the electronic product manufacturing industry and other traditional industries, such as food, fashion and appliance, and has become a practical and efficient path for China's small local firms to accumulate capital to compete with their national or international rivals. Though the model is widely criticized as 'immoral profit-making practices that upset market order, suffocate genuine Chinese creativity, and damage the image of China',¹⁶ its pragmatism in promoting China's economic growth has outweighed the importance of ethical standards in the market, thereby enabling it to expand rapidly with little restriction.

The *shanzhai* products are not only widely sold and purchased online, such as on Taobao, the Chinese version of eBay, operated by the Alibaba Group, but also talked about by ordinary consumers online. The *shanzhai* products usually look funny due to their great contrast to the high-quality original productions. Their images, news and jokes are widely circulated and consumed online for the entertainment purposes of netizens. In the meantime as the *shanzhai* products swept the market in 2008, the term *shanzhai* quickly became the hottest buzzword online with the most potential for entertainment.¹⁷ It was widely used to refer to large cohorts of imitation not limited to copycatted *shanzhai* commodities.

¹⁰Edward Tse, Kevin Ma and Yu Huang, 'Shanzhai: a Chinese phenomenon', (1 July 2009), available at: <http://www.strategyand.pwc.com/media/file/Shan-zhai.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2012).

¹¹Sheng Zhu and Yongjiang Shi, 'Shanzhai manufacturing—an alternative innovation phenomenon in China: its value chain and implications for Chinese science and technology policies', *Journal of Science and Technology Policy in China* 1(1), (2010), pp. 29–49.

¹²Lu Yin, Tianzhu Li, Yue Cheng and Shan Qiu, 'Shanzhai xianxiang de yiban guilu jiqi zhengce jianyi' ['Study on the general disciplinarian of shanzhai phenomenon and its policy suggestion'], *KexuexueYanjiu [Studies in Science of Science]* 28(3), (2010), pp. 321–328.

¹³Xionghui Leng and Mingyan Zhang, 'Shanzhai as a weak brand in contemporary China marketing', *International Journal of China Marketing* 1(2), (2011), pp. 81–94.

¹⁴Hung-hsiang Kao and Jen-fang Lee, 'The application of shanzhai innovation model in China: the examples of mobile phone, notebook computer, and automobile', paper presented at 'Opening Up Innovation: Strategy, Organization and Technology', London, 2010, available at: <http://www2.druid.dk/conferences/viewpaper.php?id=500846&cf=43> (accessed 21 February 2012).

¹⁵Xionghui Leng and Mingyan Zhang, 'Shanzhai as a weak brand in contemporary China marketing', p. 92.

¹⁶Ho, 'Shanzhai'.

¹⁷'2008nian shanzhai cheng zuihuo mingci, shanzhai wenhua jinxingshi' ['Shanzhai becomes the hottest buzzword in 2008. Shanzhai culture is in vogue'], *People.com.cn*, (8 December 2008), available at: <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/8474430.html> (accessed 22 February 2012).

From *Shanzhai* Chairman Mao, who looks like Mao, to *Shanzhai* Panda, a dog with its fur dyed like a panda, from *Shanzhai* White House to *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala, nothing could not be imitated, produced as a *shanzhai* copy and consumed online for fun. Facilitated by the online communication, the *shanzhai* wave had quickly gone beyond the original economic realm and expanded into the broader cultural sphere, making *shanzhai* a popular cultural phenomenon.¹⁸ The year 2008 was thus proclaimed by Chinese mass media as the 'Year of *Shanzhai*'.¹⁹ The formation of *shanzhai* culture is not only greatly influenced by the proliferation of *shanzhai* industry offline, but also by the prevailing *e'gao* culture online.

E'gao is a Chinese term for online spoofing and has become a popular online phenomenon since 2006. By using Photoshop, Flash and other digital remixing technologies, *e'gao* makers produce audiovisual spoofs to poke fun at professionally and industrially produced cultural prototypes, such as blockbuster movies and Red classics (Communist revolutionary films, literature and heroes). Through intertextual remixing, *e'gao* products 'create ironic incongruity that triggers humor and laughter'.²⁰ The *e'gao* video, 'A Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun' (一个馒头引发的血案), which spoofed a 2005 blockbuster movie directed by China's internationally renowned film director Chen Kaige, *The Promise* (无极), is the most-studied case to discuss the techniques, cultural and political implications of *e'gao*.²¹ It is argued that *e'gao* is a digitally-enabled subculture which allows ordinary Chinese to articulate social-political critiques and critically understand China's realities in a non-serious, playful and satirical way.²² The playfulness, counter-discourse, do-it-yourself mentality and online viral distribution of the *e'gao* culture are highly consistent with the subsequent *shanzhai* culture, especially the *shanzhai* media culture targeted at the popular shows of CCTV.

The greatest similarity between *e'gao* culture and *shanzhai* media culture is that they both deconstruct established cultural products with a sense of play and provide an alternative means for ordinary people to engage with and intervene in the mainstream culture dominated by the Party and market. However, the main difference between the two cultures is that *e'gao* works are highly intertextual and usually remix different genres of media texts, whereas *shanzhai* media cultural products use strategies of genre imitation and appropriation, as the *shanzhai* model in the manufacturing industries, which are more innovative and original with little remixing work. *Shanzhai* media cultural products also look funny as *e'gao* works, but the humorous effect is usually unintentionally created by low-quality production, which is in great contrast to the original high-quality productions. Moreover, *shanzhai* media cultural practitioners are generally cultural entrepreneurs with an economic pursuit, where most *e'gao* practitioners are anonymous netizens and do it for fun with few commercial purposes. The characteristics of the *shanzhai* media cultural products will be clearly seen from the latter case study.

As discussed, *shanzhai* media culture, as a special form of *shanzhai* culture, applies the *shanzhai* business model to media content production. In the meantime, it absorbs the essence of the prevalent *e'gao* culture, such as discursive subversion, satire, irony and counter-hegemony, in its practice. It is a hybrid cultural practice generated through dynamic interplays between *shanzhai* culture and *e'gao* culture. This culture challenges the cultural, economic and political hegemonies of the CCTV through *shanzhaing* its most-watched shows. It is a creative act of resistance that attempts to intervene in the

¹⁸Ho, 'Shanzhai'; Xue'an Wu, 'Shanzhai wenhua tuxian caogen jingshen' ['Shanzhai culture highlights grassroots spirit'], *Jinrong Shibao* [Financial Times], (6 February 2009), available at: <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/171bb671a417866fb84a8e3e.html> (accessed 22 February 2012).

¹⁹Xing Wang, 'Shanzhai culture now in crosshairs', *China Daily*, (18 May 2009), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bw/2009-05/18/content_7785393.htm (accessed 23 February 2012).

²⁰Haoming Gong and Xin Yang, 'Digitized parody: the politics of *egao* in contemporary China', *China Information* 24(1), (2010), p. 5.

²¹Haoming Gong and Xin Yang, 'Digitized parody', pp. 3–26; Bingchun Meng, 'From steamed bun to grass mud horse: *e'gao* as alternative political discourse on the Chinese Internet', *Global Media and Communication* 7(1), (2011), pp. 33–51; Haiqing Yu, 'After the "steamed bun": *e'gao* and its postsocialist politics', *Chinese Literature Today* 5(1), (2015), pp. 55–64.

²²Hongmei Li, 'Parody and resistance on the Chinese Internet', in David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, eds, *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 71–88; Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

disingenuous neoliberal logic of Chinese media from the perspective of ordinary Chinese audiences. The article will further demonstrate this in the case study after critiquing the disingenuous neoliberalism of Chinese media.

Disingenuous Neoliberalism of Chinese Media

Neoliberalism is a market-driven approach based on neoliberal theories of economics, which favors the unfettered operation of the market and the institutional establishment of strong private property rights and free trade.²³ It is not only understood as an economic policy and practice but also as an ideological paradigm, cultural structure, individual responsibility and a way of governance.²⁴ Rather than a 'fully actualized policy regime, ideological form, or regulatory framework',²⁵ neoliberalism has shown its diversity in practice globally, such as in East and Southeast Asia and Africa.²⁶ As Harvey argues, neoliberalism is 'a decentered and unstable evolutionary process', rather than being dominated by any single form of neoliberalism 'from one hegemonic center'.²⁷

Since the economic reform in 1978, China's market-oriented economic development manifests some neoliberal tendencies.²⁸ Though China's neoliberal trajectory doesn't precisely match the classic ideology of neoliberalism, it can be taken as what Brenner and Theodore call 'actually existing neoliberalism'.²⁹ China's actually existing neoliberalism has incorporated neoliberal principles in economic development with state authoritarianism, forming 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics'.³⁰ This neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics follows 'disingenuous neoliberal logic', because the centralized control of the state in China's local and national economic development inherently contradicts the classic ideology of neoliberalism that underscores economic liberalization, privatization and deregulation.³¹

In developing China's socialist market economy, the logic is embodied in the government's selective implementation of neoliberal principles in specific economic areas. For example, for the industries that are critical to the nation's economic security, such as telecoms, power generation and grids, oil and coal, the modality of 'exceptions to neoliberalism' is deployed to exclude them from 'neoliberal calculations and choices'.³² Whereas, for the *shanzhai* mobile industry that could increase employment, boost local GDP and compete with international capitals in domestic and overseas markets, the government applies the modality of 'neoliberalism as exception' to introduce 'market-driven calculations' to it and gives it the minimum restriction to energize its market dynamism.³³ The twin modalities of the neoliberalism governmentality are also concurrently deployed in the media and communication industry.³⁴ The government has absolute rights to decide what kinds of media organizations, content and capitals are

²³Mark Beeson and Iyanatul Islam, 'Neo-liberalism and East Asia: resisting the Washington consensus', *The Journal of Development Studies* 41(2), (2005), pp. 197–219; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Alvin Y. So and Yin-wah Chu, 'The transition from neoliberalism to state neoliberalism in China at the turn of the twenty-first century', in Chang Kyung-Sup, Ben Fine and Linda Weiss, eds, *Development Politics in Transition: The Neoliberal Era and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²⁴Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, 'Cities and the geographies of "actually existing" neoliberalism', *Antipode* 34(3), (2002), pp. 349–379; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Jamie Peck, 'Geography and public policy: constructions of neoliberalism', *Progress in Human Geography* 28(3), (2004), pp. 392–405.

²⁵Brenner and Theodore, 'Cities and the geographies of "actually existing" neoliberalism', p. 353.

²⁶See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Graham Harrison, *Neoliberal Africa: The Impact of Global Social Engineering* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

²⁷Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 41.

²⁸*Ibid.*; Fulong Wu, 'How neoliberal is China's reform? The origins of change during transition', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 51(5), (2010), pp. 619–631.

²⁹Brenner and Theodore, 'Cities and the geographies of "actually existing" neoliberalism'.

³⁰Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

³¹Haiqing Yu, 'Dwelling narrowness: Chinese media and their disingenuous neoliberal logic', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 25(1), (2011), pp. 33–46.

³²Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, p. 4.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁴Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p. 6.

suitable to neoliberal principles as well as when, how and to what degree neoliberal principles should be applied in the selected areas, which has formed disingenuous neoliberal development of Chinese media. In practice, this logic is mainly embodied in the media's market operation under various political interventions as well as the complicity between them.

Since the late 1980s, the Chinese government has gradually stopped giving financial subsidies to media organizations and pushed the media into the market, experimenting with a two-track system of reform in media and communications. On the one hand, the market mechanism is harnessed to stimulate the development of the media industry; on the other hand, mass media are still bound by their political obligations as mouthpieces of the Party-state.³⁵ The Chinese media industry seems to be regulated by the invisible hand of the market. Nevertheless, the market is far from free but is subject to various interventions by the state. The Party–market intertwined logic forces Chinese media to struggle desperately between market principles and ideological disciplines for survival. However, the former is subordinate to the latter, because ‘only by serving the party-state’s political interest’ would the media be ‘granted economic privileges’.³⁶ CCTV is such an example.

As one of the ‘big three’ Party-state organ media organizations, along with *People’s Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, CCTV is the only TV station under direct control of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT)—one of the highest decision-making institutions to formulate China’s media policies, industry standards and regulations.³⁷ The director of CCTV is also the deputy director of SAPPRFT. Therefore, CCTV is always protected by SAPPRFT’s favorable policies. Moreover, CCTV’s intimacy with the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the State Council—governing bodies of SAPPRFT—endows it with superior discursive power, which could represent the Party-state so to speak. It dominates the reporting of major domestic and international news events as well as live broadcasting of mega-sports events and state ceremonies. Its state-sanctioned discursive power and content monopoly convert into high earnings, making CCTV the most profitable media in China. CCTV’s strong economic power further enables it to possess the most advanced equipment and attract top media production talents to produce high-quality content that speaks for the needs of the Party-state. The mutual backup between CCTV’s political background and market dominance has made it both a powerful mouthpiece and a successful money-spinner.³⁸ The complicity of CCTV’s political and economic capitals is vividly demonstrated in its Spring Festival Gala, a media spectacle with a history of more than three decades.

In 1983, CCTV started to run its annual Spring Festival Gala on the eve of the Chinese New Year. The continuous four-to-five-hour live show, comprised of singing, dancing, traditional vernacular operas, language plays (cross-talk and comedy skits) and other variety shows, offers a grand visual banquet for millions of Chinese families, domestic and overseas.³⁹ The show ‘helps to strengthen family-centralism on the one hand, and to unify families into the “imagined community” of the Chinese nation on the other’.⁴⁰ Wanning Sun further explores the ideological functions of the gala and argues that the show delivers ‘strong messages of patriotism and national unity’ packaged as ‘entertainment, fun and family

³⁵Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Xiaoling Zhang, *The Transformation of Political Communication in China: From Propaganda to Hegemony* (London: World Scientific, 2011).

³⁶Chin-Chuan Lee, Zhou He and Yu Huang, “Chinese Party Publicity Inc.” conglomerated: the case of the Shenzhen Press Group, *Media, Culture & Society* 28(4), (2006), p. 586.

³⁷In 2013, the State Administration of Radio, Film & Television (SARFT) merged with the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP) to form the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT).

³⁸Bin Zhao, ‘Mouthpiece or money-spinner: the double life of Chinese television in the late 1990s’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(3), (1999), pp. 291–305.

³⁹Zhongdang Pan, ‘Enacting the family-nation on a global stage: an analysis of the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala’, in Michael Curtin and Hemant Shah, eds, *Re-Orienting Global Communication: India and China Beyond Borders* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), pp. 240–259.

⁴⁰Bin Zhao, ‘Popular family television and Party ideology: the Spring Festival Eve happy gathering’, *Media, Culture and Society* 20(1), (1998), p. 56.

festivity'. She believes the gala is one of the more successful experiments by the Chinese state in carrying out its ideological work in the domestic sphere of private citizens, which 'demonstrates the ingenuity of the Chinese state in reinventing ways of indoctrinating and educating the nation'.⁴¹

The gala's political clout ties it intimately to state power. It is controlled and regulated by central government institutions, including the SAPPRFT, the Publicity Department of the CCP and the Ministry of Culture. The government's interventions—mainly in guiding thought, content censorship, policy and financial support—ensure the gala runs smoothly on the correct ideological track, while also legitimizing its discursive power to represent the Party and nation. The state-sanctioned discursive power has easily converted into highly advertising revenue, making it one of the most profitable shows in China. For example, CCTV's 2010 gala earned 650 million CNY, which was almost the yearly advertising revenue of many provincial satellite TV channels in China.⁴² After three decades of operation, the gala has become an important 'edutainment' ritual for the Party's thought-work in the reform era, a cash cow for CCTV as well as an indispensable part of the ordinary Chinese people's New Year celebration.

The disingenuous neoliberal logic has not only produced media spectacles that maximize ideological and economic benefits, but has also resulted in unfair competition between central and local media. When CCTV's 'official-profiteering monopoly' is challenged,⁴³ SAPPRFT will issue various notices and regulations to restrict its local competitors. SAPPRFT's crackdown on the 2005 *Super Girl*, a reality show run by Hunan Satellite Television, whose extremely high audience ratings allegedly had surpassed CCTV's prime time *Network News* that had led the ratings of all China's TV programs for decades, is an example in point.⁴⁴ Though China's media conglomeration since the mid-1990s has encouraged local media groups to become 'bigger and stronger' (做大做强) through market dynamism, under the state's tendentious media policies and regulations, it is a mission impossible for local media to compete equally with the central Party-state media in practice. The process of conglomeration has not weakened the Party-state's manipulation and interference in the media market. Rather, it has ensured the Party-state's effective control of media resources at the cost of equal competition.⁴⁵

As one of the biggest beneficiaries of the logic, CCTV's political and economic hegemonies have not only provoked complaints from unequally treated local media, but also inflamed dissatisfaction and resistance among ordinary Chinese audiences. With the deepening of China's media commercialization and marketization, as well as the rapid development of its Internet, Chinese mass audiences have evolved from passive into active participants.⁴⁶ They are no longer monolithic, passively reading, watching and listening to media; instead, they have become consumers, who choose media channels and information, offer critical comments and participate in media content production. They creatively deconstruct and reconstruct CCTV, poking fun at its discursive style, logo, anchors and even the physical appearance of its new headquarters in Beijing, which has made CCTV one of the most popular *e'gao* targets online.⁴⁷ The resistance not only rests on the discursive subversion in the form of *e'gao*, but has gone further to ally with the prevailing *shanzhai* ethos and grassroots entrepreneurship in 2008, generating *shanzhai* media culture. The article will take the *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala as a case study to investigate how this culture attempted to resist and intervene in the disingenuous neoliberalism of Chinese media through copycatting CCTV's brand shows. Though some *e'gao* and *shanzhai* CCTV

⁴¹Wanning Sun, 'Dancing with chains: significant moments on China Central Television', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2), (2007), p. 191.

⁴²'Yangshi chunwan guanggao chao 6.5yi chuang xingao' ['The advertising revenue of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala reached 650 million CNY'], *163.com*, (8 February 2010), available at: <http://news.163.com/10/0208/04/5UVNFB0J000120GR.html> (accessed 25 February 2012).

⁴³Yong Zhong, 'The other edge of commercialization: enhancing CCTV's propaganda', *Media International Australia* 100(1), (2001), p. 167.

⁴⁴'Yangshi youbian lao'er, pinpin chuzhao daya chaonu' ['CCTV worries about losing dominant status and cracks down on *Super Girl*'], *hexun.com*, available at: http://cohiba.blog.hexun.com/834561_d.html (accessed 25 February 2012).

⁴⁵Haiqing Yu, *Media and Cultural Transformation in China* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 7–8.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Ruoyun Bai, 'Disrobing CCTV: scandal, *e'gao*, and resistance in China's cyberspace', *Paradoxa* 22, (2010), pp. 249–268.

works existed before the *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala, Lao Meng, the producer of the gala, was the first to pick a fight with CCTV openly and provoke a response from the power behind CCTV. The gala was mentioned as a key event in nearly all news reports, commentaries and academic writings on China's *shanzhai* culture. The fate of Lao Meng's gala had greatly influenced the evolution of subsequent *shanzhai* CCTV productions. The case study will help understand not only the enabling and limiting aspects of *shanzhai* media culture it represents, but also the disciplinary power of the disingenuous neoliberalism prevailing in the Chinese media system it attempted to challenge.

Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala: A Case Study

Lao Meng, full name Shi Mengqi, was born in 1972. He used to be an IT worker, event planner and producer of wedding videos. In 2002, he moved to Beijing from Southwest China. As a migrant, he often spent his Spring Festival in Beijing alone. Watching CCTV's gala had become a routine on New Year's Eve. For him, the gala was an extravaganza hosted by a national TV station, performed by famous stars and sponsored by big corporations, leaving few opportunities for ordinary people to take part in it. Therefore, he came up with an idea of running a grassroots gala to entertain rural migrant workers and students who could not return home for family gatherings during the Spring Festival.⁴⁸ Against the backdrop of the rise of the *shanzhai* economy and the *e'gao* craze, Lao Meng started to prepare his *shanzhai* gala at the end of 2008.

On 23 November 2008, Lao Meng posted a 'call for programs' on his blog. He addressed the nation's netizens as follows:

The purpose of running this gala is to entertain the people for the sake of entertainment. Though we are not as rich as CCTV, we can collect the best creative ideas and the most excellent programs from the nation's people. All friends with talent are welcome to join us. This will be a Spring Festival gala for ordinary people.⁴⁹

In the blog entry, he proposed that the slogan of his *shanzhai* gala would be 'People's Gala Held by the People. Run a Good Gala for the People' (人民春晚人民办, 办好春晚为人民). The slogan readily reminded people of one of the best-known Maoist slogans, 'Serve the People' (为人民服务). Moreover, his slogan was written in big Chinese characters. The font intentionally *shanzhai-ed* Chairman Mao's handwriting, creating the idea that at least in his gala the people could become the real masters of China as in the Mao era.

On the car he drove across Beijing to promote the gala, Lao Meng printed materials with the words, 'Challenge CCTV and wish all Chinese people a happy Spring Festival' (向央视春晚叫板, 给全国人民拜年). He also printed the logo CCSTV on microphones, banners and cars. Though he explained that CCSTV was short for China Countryside Television (中国山寨电视台) and had nothing to do with CCTV, it is apparently seen that he creatively altered the logo of CCTV by adding a letter 'S' which represents '*shanzhai*' to poke fun at the national TV station.

Lao Meng's public challenge immediately caught public attention. On 29 November 2008, the *Beijing Times* first reported Lao Meng's gala in an article headlined 'Ordinary citizen intends to run *shanzhai* version of Spring Festival Gala and challenge CCTV'.⁵⁰ When audiences and media were preparing to watch CCTV's gala in two months' time, Lao Meng's counter-CCTV gala became eye-catching news. People were eager to witness the fight between 'ant' and 'elephant'. Many traditional and Internet media interviewed Lao Meng and reported on his gala plan. He soon became a media celebrity for his open challenge to CCTV.

⁴⁸'Shanzhai CCTV Spring Festival Gala to go online', *People's Daily*, (8 February 2010), available at: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90782/6889924.html> (accessed 28 February 2012).

⁴⁹Lao Meng, 'Shanzhai chunwan zhengji jiemu' ['Shanzhai gala calls for programs'], *Sina Blog*, (23 November 2008), available at: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_045571650100b8.html (accessed 4 March 2012).

⁵⁰Fei Jiang, 'Game between "Quan" and "Shi": communication strategy for shanzhai subculture in China cyberspace', paper presented at the 7th Chinese Internet Research Conference, Pennsylvania, USA, 2009, available at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/15919031/Fei-Jiang-Chinese-Shanzhai-Culture-Studies> (accessed 4 March 2012).

As an IT worker, Lao Meng knew the importance of the Internet and used it to promote his show. He established an official portal site (www.ccstv.net) to promote the gala and to post updates. Through the official website, Lao Meng could interact with netizens and understand the real needs of ordinary people. The netizens could recommend their favorite grassroots stars to perform in the show, make comments and offer suggestions. After the announcement of Lao Meng's show, more than 300 people expressed interest in working as volunteers. Netizens recommended about 300 original programs, while six enterprises wanted to sponsor his gala.⁵¹

The *shanzhai* gala not only caught the traditional media's attention as a news event, but also attracted its participation and cooperation. Guizhou Satellite Television, a provincial satellite TV channel in Southwest China with a signal capable of reaching all regions in China, intended to cooperate with Lao Meng and provide a live broadcasting platform. The two parties quickly signed a contract for mutual benefit. For Lao Meng, a satellite TV channel could provide a national broadcasting platform that would allow his gala to compete equally with CCTV's show. For Guizhou Satellite Television, a station in a less-developed region with low advertising revenue, this presented an opportunity to increase its national market share by using the *shanzhai* gala's social influence. The support from the local TV station and the high degree of public attention meant the *shanzhai* gala became a competitive rival, something CCTV's gala had not had before. When the dominant status of CCTV was challenged, SAPPRFT immediately joined hands with other related governmental departments to intervene through administrative means.

In late December 2008, SAPPRFT issued an informal notice, ordering all television stations not to participate in, broadcast or report the *shanzhai* gala.⁵² Under SAPPRFT's pressure, Guizhou Satellite Television had to give up the profitable collaboration with the *shanzhai* gala. Lao Meng's plan to compete with the CCTV's gala on a national broadcasting platform evaporated overnight. Moreover, the portal site that had promised to broadcast the *shanzhai* gala live suddenly ceased cooperation with him.⁵³ Lao Meng's gala had lost another important broadcasting platform. He also received a warning from the government, informing him that he did not have 'performance approval' from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs and could not host a public gala. The provider of the performance venue also canceled Lao Meng's booking without explanation. Finally, Lao Meng had to cooperate with Macau Asia Satellite Television (MASTV) to broadcast his show live. As a private media company in the Macau Special Administrative Region, MASTV was free from SAPPRFT's regulations. However, the signals of private TV stations in China's Special Administrative Regions could only reach a very limited area in mainland China. Only a very limited audience watched the show on New Year's Eve.⁵⁴ Just as Lao Meng said in an interview, the biggest difficulty in preparing the gala was not caused by financial or technological problems; instead, it was some 'invisible resistance force' from above.⁵⁵

Due to the state interventions, Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala failed to challenge the market dominance of the CCTV's gala. Its challenge could only stay at the discursive level, which enabled audiences to reflect critically on the hegemonic discourses of the official gala through viewing the *shanzhai* show with a bit of satirical fun. The opening remark of the *shanzhai* gala clearly embodied its playful resistance in discourse.

The opening remark is one of the most important components of the CCTV's gala. Six nationally well-known hosts from CCTV (three males and three females) come on to the stage to greet the national

⁵¹'Shanzhai chunwan huo qiye rongzi baiwan wangyou baoming jiemu 500 duoge' ['Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala receives 1 million CNY in financing. Netizens recommend more than 500 programs'], *Sohu.com*, (5 December 2008), available at: <http://yule.sohu.com/20081205/n261029897.shtml> (accessed 4 March 2012).

⁵²Fei Jiang, 'Game between "Quan" and "Shi"'.

⁵³'Shanzhai chunwan jiduo chou: yanchu changdi bei quxiao, wangluo zhibo cheng paoying' ['Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala's troubles: performing venue was canceled and online live broadcast became impossible'], *Ido.3mt.com.cn*, (22 January 2009), available at: <http://ido.3mt.com.cn/Article/200901/show1258008c26p1.html> (accessed 10 March 2012).

⁵⁴Wenjuan Jiang and Jun Ma, 'Shanzhai chunwan de feizhengchang siwang' ['The unnatural death of Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala'], *Qingnian Zhoumo* [Youth Weekend], (4 February 2009), available at: http://www.360doc.com/content/09/0208/23/142_2493518.shtml (accessed 10 March 2012).

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

audiences and declare the opening of the gala with resonant Mandarin. Though the wording of the opening remark varies every year, its formal style, official tone, flowery rhetoric and sacred sense of ritual remain constant. The *shanzhai* gala copycatted the section of the opening remark. However, it creatively changed the content, style and tone of the official one. In the *shanzhai* gala, the opening remark was adapted to a slow beat rap. Five amateur hosts, including two adult males, two adult females and a little boy around five years old (standing in front of the four adults), sang the opening remark and swayed their bodies with rhythm.

The year of 2008 has flown away. The year of 2009 has already come. No matter how severe the global economic crisis are, ordinary people's lives are still the most important. If you want to cry, just cry out; if you want to laugh, just laugh out loud. Pour all your complaints out from the heart, because you will not be able to afford expensive medicines if you become depressed or sick ... If you buy a car, don't drive it so often. The increasing petrol price is unaffordable ... May ordinary people's lives become better and better. (Opening remark of the 2009 *Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala.)⁵⁶

In contrast to the opening remark of the CCTV's gala, which aims to link the family celebration with the nation's unity and prosperity, the opening remark of the *shanzhai* gala deconstructed the grand 'family-nation' narrative with personal narrative. Social issues that ordinary Chinese people encountered in everyday life, such as the high cost of medical care, high petrol price and the stock market crash, were creatively adapted in the remark with a sense of satire and humor. The converted remark had secularized the sacred sense of ritual the official remark had and hauled people back to reality from the imagined national celebration the official gala constructs.

However, the counter-narrative gala could not be widely viewed and achieve its expected effect due to the government's crackdown. Lao Meng intended to upload the recorded gala online and allow more people to watch it. However, he could not upload the videos to nearly 60 Chinese video-hosting websites as long as the clips were tagged as '*Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala',⁵⁷ because major audio-visual websites received a notice from China Internet Audio-Visual Program Service and Self-Discipline Alliance (CIAPSSA) around 20 January 2009, ordering all members to boycott the *shanzhai* gala.⁵⁸ CIAPSSA is a government-affiliated association with more than 150 audio-visual service sites as members. It is directly guided by the SAPPRFT. In China, the TV industry and the Internet audio-visual industry are not mutually independent but intertwined through SAPPRFT's administrative power. Any attempt to challenge SAPPRFT-supported TV shows through alternative online platforms is doomed to failure, due to SAPPRFT's intervention in the online video market in the name of CIAPSSA's self-discipline, as well as the self-censorship of the video-hosting websites.

The failure of Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala has vividly demonstrated the unequal treatment of the private media capital from the government. Although in the era of China's membership of the World Trade Organization, the state has encouraged domestic and foreign private capital to play a larger role in its Chinese cultural economy, the Party-state has never relaxed its vigilance on the expansion of private capital in media and communication that might affect its political legitimacy and stability.⁵⁹ Private capital is only allowed to enter the 'peripheral areas' of media and cultural production and distribution, such as film, TV drama, entertainment news and advertising.⁶⁰ For the sacred and ritualistic media events that serve the Party's political ends, such as the annual televised celebration of the Spring Festival on New Year's Eve and the 2015 China Victory Day Parade in front of Tiananmen Gate, domestic and foreign private capitals are strictly prohibited. The case also shows that China's central media organizations enjoy the state-protected monopolies in market competition. Any attempt to challenge their dominant status,

⁵⁶The video of Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCWglyul7fA&%20feature=Play-List&p=147B058ACA9DE719&playnext_from=PL&ind%20ex=0&playnext=1 (accessed 4 April 2012).

⁵⁷Oiwan Lam, 'Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala blocked in China', (5 February 2009), available at: <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2009/02/05/shanzhai-spring-festival-gala-blocked-in-china/> (accessed 14 March 2012).

⁵⁸Wenjuan Jiang and Jun Ma, 'Shanzhai chunwan de feizhengchang siwang'.

⁵⁹Yuezhi Zhao, 'Neoliberal strategies, socialist legacies: communication and State transformation in China', in Paula Chakravartty and Yuezhi Zhao, eds, *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 23–50.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

either from private or state-owned local media outlets, would be cracked down. Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala had touched the two forbidden zones and was impossible to succeed.

The disciplinary power of the disingenuous neoliberal logic of Chinese media could not only effectively crack down any subversive force that poses a challenge to it, but could also co-opt and reshape the oppositional force. In 2010, Lao Meng ran his second gala. However, learning lessons from the 2009 gala, he abandoned the ambition to challenge the CCTV's gala and changed the name of his show to 'Folk Spring Festival Gala' (民间春晚). This title was more conservative and had relinquished the cynical spirit and revolutionary ethos the original title had. In promoting the show, Lao Meng gave up the radical slogan against CCTV used the previous year; instead, he proposed to promote China's folk culture. This aligned well with the government's cultural policies to enrich and develop the 'culture of the masses' (群众文化) and to protect the folk culture.⁶¹ The adaption to the mainstream ideology enabled it to smoothly obtain performance approval from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, and so it could be broadcast live online. Moreover, the gala had been openly commercialized. Sponsored by several enterprises, Lao Meng estimated the gala could earn one million CNY in 2010.⁶² Lao Meng had adapted his show to the power-money alliance that he challenged the previous year to ensure the survival of the show. The *shanzhai* gala with subversive ethos and grassroots spirit had been pulled back on to the 'politically correct' track and became a commercial show that abided by the rules of the game in China's media market.

Shanzhai Culture after Lao Meng

Though Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala could not realize its aim of rivaling the CCTV gala, it pushed the craze of *shanzhai* culture to its apex. As one of the most important cultural events in 2008, it caused a heated debate on the *shanzhai* cultural phenomenon on the traditional media and the Internet, particularly among elites in intellectual circles. Some people were very optimistic about *shanzhai* culture, as they believed that it embodied the subjectivity and creativity of the grassroots and created a more open, equal and inclusive cultural environment, whereas some argued that *shanzhai* impinged on intellectual property rights and would harm the real cultural innovation in the long run.⁶³ This phenomenon was even reported by CCTV. On 2 December 2008, CCTV's *Network News*, the most influential national news program in China, had a two-minute report on *shanzhai*. The news segment featured an interview with a *shanzhai* mobile retailer in Beijing and then briefly mentioned the rise of *shanzhai* cultural phenomenon, such as *shanzhai* movies, pop stars and the Spring Festival gala. It also cited an online survey indicating that more than half of the survey participants supported *shanzhai*. However, the news ended with a summary of scholarly opinions:

The popularity of *shanzhai* culture and products reflects the public's psychological needs to follow the fashion and purchase cheap things. But the *shanzhai* market needs to be further regulated and managed in many aspects, such as quality inspection, protection of consumer rights and so on.⁶⁴

Although CCTV's news report acknowledged the popularity of *shanzhai* culture, from its concluding remark we can see that the government supported necessary regulation on *shanzhai* products rather

⁶¹'Qunzhong wenhua huodong fangzhen' ['Policies on the mass cultural activities'], *Chinaculture.org*, available at: http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/cn_law/2004-06/28/content_49714.htm (accessed 12 December 2015); 'Guanyu shishi zhongguo minzu minjian wenhua baohu gongzuo de tongzhi' ['Notice on the implementation of the protection of China's ethnic and folk culture'], *ihchina.cn*, available at: <http://www.ihchina.cn/show/feiyiweb/html/com.tjopen.define.pojo.feiyiweb.faguwenjian.detail.html?id=a7433181-5125-45ae-a7d8-67ef2eaf4843&classPath=com.tjopen.define.pojo.feiyiweb.faguwenjian.FaGuiWenJian> (accessed 12 December 2015).

⁶²'Bei zhengtong zhao'an, shangyehua de caogen chunwan haineng zou duoyuan' ['Bought off by the official. How far can a commercialized grassroots gala go?'], *Xinhuanet.com*, (5 January 2010), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/focus/2010-01/05/content_12757057.htm (accessed 10 April 2012).

⁶³'Shanzhai chunwan shi chuangxin haishi qinquan' ['Is Shanzhai culture an innovation or infringement?'], *Beijing Zhoubao* [Beijing Review], (3 April 2009), available at: http://www.beijingreview.com.cn/jd/txt/2009-04/03/content_189550_2.htm (accessed 15 April 2012).

⁶⁴The video and manuscript of CCTV's news report on *shanzhai*, available at: <http://tv.sohu.com/20081202/n260982719.shtml> (accessed 15 April 2012).

than promoting them without control. The regulation and control soon became evident in dealing with Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala. Compared with the *shanzhai* mobile industry in pursuit of market profit only and other *shanzhai* cultural products just for fun, such as the *shanzhai* panda and the *shanzhai* Michael Jackson, the *shanzhai* gala attempted to challenge the market dominance of CCTV and deconstruct its 'edutainment' discourse at the same time. This posed a threat to the power–money alliance of the state media underpinned by the disingenuous neoliberalism and was therefore intolerable.

As the most well-known and influential *shanzhai* CCTV production, the failure of Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala had not only caused the transformation of his own gala in 2010, but had also influenced the evolution of the *shanzhai* media culture. The subsequent *shanzhai* CCTV works after Lao Meng only imitated the formats and styles of established CCTV shows and produced content with a bit of satirical fun. They looked more like *e'gao* works that only played with the established shows without any attempt to challenge their market dominance. They could be broadcast and circulated online with little restriction as other ordinary *shanzhai* cultural products, because they were unable to challenge the power–money hegemony of CCTV as Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala. If Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala had realized its ambition it would not be impossible that subsequent producers would follow suit and collaborate with private or local media capitals to compete with CCTV.

Following Lao Meng's failed gala, *shanzhai* culture has also shown an apparent declining tendency. There is no evidence to demonstrate that the decline was relevant to the crackdown on the *shanzhai* gala. Nevertheless, the decline was directly related to the government's enhanced Internet censorship in early 2009. As mentioned earlier, Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala could not be broadcast live online and videos of the show could not be uploaded online due to the self-censorship of the CIAPSSA membership sites under the directive of the SAPPRFT. The self-censorship of the audio-visual websites soon became a national Internet crackdown. On 5 January 2009, seven government institutions, including the SAPPRFT, the Ministry of Public Security and the State Council Information Office, launched a crackdown on 'the wave of online smut'. The anti-smut campaign aimed to clean up vulgar content online, which was labeled by the government as 'immoral' and 'tasteless' and was accused of harming the physical and mental health of young people.⁶⁵ Many *shanzhai* cultural productions, which mocked the political powers and were criticized for vulgar content with low-taste, were deleted from the Internet. This was quite similar to the crackdown on the craze of *e'gao* culture through a campaign to 'civilize the web' (文明办网) in 2006.⁶⁶

Though the government did not formally ban *shanzhai* cultural production, it strategically intensified Internet censorship to control the circulation and consumption of *shanzhai* cultural products. This also demonstrated that *shanzhai* culture, as an Internet-facilitated cultural practice, was subject to the government's Internet regulations and control and was born with limitations. As Zhang and Fung conclude, *shanzhai* culture has a 'symbiotic' or 'parasitic' relationship to power.⁶⁷ China's tightly controlled Internet represents such a power. This kind of relationship determines that the political resistance of *shanzhai* culture is unstable and controllable.

Conclusion

As a particular type of *shanzhai* culture, *shanzhai* media culture turned out to be short-lived and limiting. It failed to shake CCTV's power–money alliance underpinned by the disingenuous neoliberal logic as it attempted to do. However, it had shown the sincere public sentiment against CCTV's economic and

⁶⁵'Guoxinban deng qibuwei kaizhan zhengzhi huijianwang disu zhifeng zhuanxiang xingdong' ['State Council Information Office of China and other six ministries and commissions initiated a campaign on the vulgar content online'], *China.com.cn*, (5 January 2009), available at: http://www.china.com.cn/policy/txt/2009-01/05/content_17056784.htm (accessed 20 April 2012).

⁶⁶Geremie Barmé, 'Eating Chinese—a historical banquet', paper presented at the conference 'The Future of US–China Relations', University of South California, USA, 2007, p. 7, available at: <http://china.usc.edu/sites/default/files/legacy/AppImages/Barme.pdf> (accessed 16 December 2015).

⁶⁷Zhang and Fung, 'The myth of "shanzhai" culture and the paradox of digital democracy in China'.

discursive hegemonies caused by the logic as well as the creative resistance of ordinary audiences to intervene to the logic. In the meantime, the crackdown on Lao Meng's *shanzhai* gala and subsequent evolution of Lao Meng's gala and other *shanzhai* CCTV productions had illustrated the powerful protection mechanism of the logic and its ability to govern, incorporate and reshape resistance forces. The disingenuous neoliberalism of Chinese media is not only protected by various administrative measures from the government, but also proactively adapts itself to the evolution of media technologies, market and audiences to maintain its effectiveness and longevity. The reform of CCTV's spectacular shows in recent years, such as its Spring Festival Gala and *Network News*, has shown the resilience and adaptability of the disingenuous neoliberalism of Chinese media.

Facing the challenges from regional broadcasters, digital content providers as well as viewers in the post-broadcast era, CCTV has started to reform its content to win hearts and minds of audiences. For example, CCTV and China Network Television (CNTV), CCTV's official online broadcasting platform established in December 2009, produced a reality TV series called 'I Want to Perform at the Spring Festival Gala' (我要上春晚) in September 2010. Grassroots artists were encouraged to upload their performance videos online. Those who obtained high votes from netizens could attend a final contest broadcast live on CCTV to compete for an opportunity to perform at the Spring Festival Gala. In the 2010 show, a migrant worker duo, a subway singer and a hip-hop group of migrant workers from Shenzhen, won the right to stand on the stage of CCTV's 2011 gala.⁶⁸ Also, *Network News* has taken a series of 'face-changing' measures to bring the program closer to viewers by replacing the old anchors with dynamic young anchors, increasing the proportion of civic news and encouraging the participation of audiences through the Internet.⁶⁹ By adding in more audience-friendly elements, such as grassroots participation, online interaction and plebification, which are often used by CCTV's rivals to compete with it, these micro-reforms aim to promote attractiveness of the CCTV's programs among fragmented audiences and consolidate CCTV's dominance in the increasingly competitive media market. Simply, CCTV intends to become a more efficient mouthpiece and money-spinner by proactively and innovatively adapting itself to China's fast-changing media environment.

This article does not aim to theorize the *shanzhai* culture as a whole. Nor does it use the popular discourses of democracy, modernity and globalization extensively used by scholars and commentators to explain China's *shanzhai* phenomenon.⁷⁰ It focuses on *shanzhai* media culture and its representative case to examine the formation, performance and evolution of this particular type of *shanzhai* culture. By analyzing its dynamic interplays with the target it copycats and challenges—CCTV and the power behind CCTV—the article has illustrated the political implications and limitations of *shanzhai* media culture. The study of *shanzhai* media culture and its governance is conducive in understanding the criticism, disciplinary power and adaptability of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics in China's post-reform era from the microcosm of media and communications.

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⁶⁸Kui Li, 'Chunwan de caogen qingjie' ['The "grassroots" complex of the Spring Festival Gala'], *Beijing Wanbao* [Beijing Evening News], (13 February 2015), available at: http://bjwb.bjd.com.cn/html/2015-02/13/content_257743.htm (accessed 28 December 2015).

⁶⁹Shengkai Chen, 'Yangshi xinwen lianbo bianlian dui difangtai de qishi' ['Face changing at the CCTV's *Network News* inspires local TV stations'], (8 April 2013), available at: <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/0408/c360577-21057239.html> (accessed 28 December 2015).

⁷⁰Chubb, 'China's *Shanzhai* culture'; Ho, '*Shanzhai*'; Zhang and Fung, 'The myth of "*shanzhai*" culture and the paradox of digital democracy in China'.

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